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Unco Junto: Offense By Proxy And The Moral Right To Indignation

September 8, 2016
Benjamin Radford

A Skeptic Reads the Newspaper

This blog is part of a monthly series I've titled "Unco Junto" (after the discussion clubs founded by Benjamin Franklin) in which I offer an introductory topic essay and a handful of commenters are invited to respond in any way they see fit. The goal is to provide a forum for long-form–and hopefully provocative–analysis in a media often dominated by superficial sound bites. This time around, standup comic Ian Harris and cariacturist Celestia Ward join me.

Offense by Proxy and the Moral Right to Indignation

It's no secret that (potentially) offensive things are all around us: Social media and news stories are populated by stories of both genuine and almost-certainly-staged outrage over offensive remarks. Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump seems constitutionally incapable of not making offensive comments, whether about Mexicans, women, Muslims, war heroes, or anything else. Then there's comedian Stephen Fry, who takes a dim view of the process of taking offense: "It's now very common to hear people say, 'I'm rather offended by that.' As if that gives them certain rights. It's actually nothing more… than a whine. 'I find that offensive.' It has no meaning; it has no purpose; it has no reason to be respected as a phrase: 'I am offended by that.' Well, so fucking what."

I think we can all agree that there are indeed some things worth being offended about. It's one thing to be offended as the target of an objectionable action or insult, but what about being offended on behalf of other people, whether requested or not? In many cases people defer to a victim's interpretation, experience, or "personal truth" about what happened. After all, a person who tells another what or how to think about that person's experience is imposing their own set of values and beliefs.

Blasphemy laws could be interpreted as a sort of offense by proxy. An omnipotent, jealous god may be insulted by unkind words, but if He or She is, it's the followers who decide and mete justice on their deities' behalf. In his book *Blasphemy: Verbal Offense Against the Sacred from Moses to Salman Rushdie* (Knopf, 1993) Leonard Levy notes that what a group of people considers blasphemous "is a litmus test of the standards a society believes it must enforce to preserve its unity, its peace, its morality, and feelings, and the road to salvation." Early Christians were intolerant of blasphemy, and in fact Leviticus 24:16 specifically calls for blasphemers to be killed. The Hebrew Bible goes even further, specifying that those who offend God should be butchered alive and their homes destroyed: "every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against God shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill" (Daniel 3:29). Atheists and humanists consider blasphemy to be a victimless crime–as imaginary beings cannot take offense at anything–though as Levy notes the idea of nonbelievers being blasphemous is a relatively recent development. Those accused of (and executed for) blasphemy have usually been religious people; indeed, "For most of history, blasphemers have been devout Christians."Protestant pastor Martin Niemöller's most famous and moving verse encourages people to speak out or stand up on the behalf of others:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out-
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out-
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out-
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me-and there was no one left to speak for me.

This was, however, written specifically about the Nazi Holocaust, and the affront mentioned is far graver and more ominous than an offense or verbal insult: "they came for…" evokes images of kidnapping, disappearances, and mass murder.

Nonetheless, the link between insults (particularly dehumanizing insults) and genocide is well established; while words by themselves cannot kill-most countries have at least nominal guarantees of freedom of speech-they can set the stage for atrocities. Jews and others were referred to in Hitler's regime as rats and vermin, allowing the masses to conceptualize their victims as worthless. As David Livingstone Smith, author of *Less Than Human*, told NPR, "When the Nazis described Jews as *Untermenschen*, or subhumans, they didn't mean it metaphorically, 'They didn't mean they were like subhumans. They meant they were literally subhuman.'" In the months leading up to the 1994 Rwandan genocide, dominant ethnic group Hutus often referred to Tutsi tribe–who were later slaughtered en masse–as "cockroaches."

These are, of course, extreme examples. Anyone with an internet connection likely sees dozens, if not hundreds, of personal attacks, smears, and insults every day. The internet (and social media in particular) is filled with vile commentary, racist diatribes, trolling, and insults–directed at (and sometimes by) presidential candidates, celebrities, other posters on news stories (hence the common refrain, "don't read the comments"), and so on (for an interesting look at the phenomenon see Whitney Phillips's book *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*).

The vast majority of these slurs and insults are directed at people the reader does not know personally and therefore presumably has no personal investment in or reason to defend (what do you care if "Bob1988" tells "SnarkMaster18" that he's a Nazi or a deluded fool?). Yet there are times when people feel obligated to stand up for others.

People often police each other's behavior by enforcing social mores and etiquette. The nature of the victim certainly plays a role as well: We are more likely to intervene in a mother screaming at her five-year-old daughter for some seeming minor infraction than we are if her daughter is fifteen. Similarly, insults apparently hurled in the service of social injustice (racial, sexual, or other bias) is likely to provoke a reaction defending others from insult.

These are fairly clear-cut cases in which insult is obviously intended–and taken. But I'm more interested in the broader question of whether (or when) it is appropriate to take offense when the victim either is not obviously offended, or explicitly states that no offense was in fact taken. For example after 18-year-old Patrick Farves asked Miss America Nina Davuluri to the prom during her appearance at his high school, he was suspended for several days and criticized for causing offense. Davuluri addressed the matter with a message saying in part, "I was flattered by the gesture although I am unfortunately unable to attend [prom] due to my travel schedule. I later learned of the disciplinary action taken and reached out to the school in hopes that they will reconsider their decision."

One can certainly argue that Farves's action was disrespectful, publicity-seeking, or inappropriate (blogger Amanda Marcotte went so far as to call it "sexual harassment"), but if Davuluri herself was not offended (and was in fact "flattered" as she claimed–and I certainly would not presume to suggest she was being disingenuous or tell her how she should interpret her experience) the question is why (or whether) anyone else should take offense on her behalf. Of course, there are times when taking offense at seemingly innocuous things is done in service of a particular social agenda. This "faux outrage" is often done to draw attention or sympathy for a cause, and may or may not reflect genuine personal offense taken at potentially questionable comments or conduct.

Often the target of the potentially offending comment or action has the choice of whether to take offense. Some may choose not to do so if they understand that no offense was intended, such as when the thoughtless comment is a result of cultural or generational differences. In his insightful book *Sticks and Stones: The Philosophy of Insults*, Prof. Jerome Neu notes that "The situation in relation to feeling insulted and being insulted is complicated by the fact that insults involve others, and so at least two states of mind come into play: that of the insulter and that of the insulted, or of the would-be insulter and the might-be insulted. And there is a further complexity. Being insulted, unlike being jealous and more like being betrayed, is ambiguous. It may refer to either a psychological state or a social condition (which in turn one may or may not be aware of)" (p. 8).

It could be argued that being offended on someone else's behalf–and contrary to his or her wishes or without being asked to do so–is itself offensive, as it removes that person's agency and denies them the right to define their own experiences. Especially if the person taking offense by proxy is in a position of power (by virtue of race, class, education, etc.) it may subtly reinforce false stereotypes of powerlessness, suggesting for example that a minority needs intervention afforded by privilege and can't stand up for themselves. Offense by proxy attempts to impose an outsider's (often collective) social justice interpretation on an individual's experience, to accept a narrative they may not agree with. (Women in particular who are deemed as not sufficiently offended by their own experiences may in some cases even be accused of being brainwashed or having internalized sexist stereotypes.)

We are often taught to step in when we see bullying, but when that happens in real life, the circumstances of our intervention are clear and right in front of us, on a schoolyard, park, or football field for example. But events between strangers that we learn about online are a very different matter: Of course having only passing, superficial knowledge about a situation has never stopped people online from taking sides, often vehemently–but it raises the issue of whether most people who are offended on someone else's behalf really have enough information to validate that offense.

For example a gay friend occasionally calls me "faggot" as a term of endearment, though a stranger who overhears that exchange in passing might easily–and wrongly–take offense on my behalf. Though the word is a common anti-gay slur that in many cases would be intended to insult, in my case offense would be neither intended nor taken. In August 2012 many people took offense on behalf of African-Americans (and others of African descent) when British pop star Lily Allen tweeted "I hate it when black cab drivers spend the entire journey on the phone. I WANTED A CHAT." What those who tweeted their indignation at her seemingly racist comment failed to understand was that "black" referred to the color (and type) of taxi–similar to Yellow cabs in New York City–not the race of the driver.

The situation may also arise when minority groups are subjected to potentially offensive names, such as the professional football team the Washington Redskins. This is complicated by the fact that according to a recent *Washington Post* poll, 90% of Native Americans surveyed said they did not find the term offensive. If a non-Native American person takes offense at the name on behalf of the small minority of Native Americans who are offended, the question arises why that person is in a better position (or more qualified) to judge what is (or should be) offensive than the majority of Native Americans: Some might be far more insulted that a White person would take offense on their behalf over the name than by the name itself.

Should people take offense on behalf of others, and if so, under what conditions? Even if a "victim" claims no offense was taken by an insult, is there a kind of "collective offense" which should be taken on behalf of other potential victims as a sort of symbolic offense-taking, to communicate to the offender that–though the victim in this particular case was not offended–others in similar situations are likely to be offended and therefore the behavior should stop? Who has the moral right to be offended?

…

Offense By Proxy

Ian Harris

As a comedian this is a subject that I find myself talking about practically on a daily basis. In fact this is a common theme in comedy clubs and a common inside joke between comedians–one that often gets a good laugh on stage as well. I can't even count how many times I have seen, heard, or personally had to point out, to an uptight audience, that the person they are offended for is laughing their ass off at a joke that was not even offensive, but just touched on a stereotype, or merely mentioned a race, ethnicity or religion different from the joke slinger. Most of the time this occurs when a white guy makes a joke about a black guy. The typical line from the comedian is something like "Look at the white people looking around the room to make sure it's okay to laugh" or "Look white people, the black people are laughing, so it's okay to loosen then hell up a tad."

I personally think that not only is the idea of "Offense by Proxy" utterly ridiculous, I honestly am not even convinced that being offended in general garners any sympathy from me or carries much weight. I am not even sure what anyone means these days when they say they were "offended." I have never in my life used that particular word. I find that I use synonyms far more often. To me, synonyms just don't have the same impact that I feel when someone says they are "offended." I have been "sickened" by attitudes and vile actions. I have been "annoyed" with ignorance. I have been "angry" at direct insults, which of course means I have been "insulted" by words. I have felt "uncomfortable" in a situation where someone is spouting inappropriate or vulgar things. But I don't ever seem to get "offended" in the way others do. I never want to stifle someone's words, even if I don't agree with them.

I may wish for them to stop talking on their own accord. I also find that the things that affect me personally are not words necessarily or even abstract ideas, but more when I am personally misrepresented or misunderstood. Nothing irks me more than for my integrity or well-meaning to be challenged or dismissed. That is about as close to being "offended" as you will ever see me. That is not to say that I won't stand up for wrongdoing. I will fight for human rights. I will stand up to a bully. I will march or go to a rally or whatever I feel necessary when actual hurt is happening: physical, legal, etc. But words?

That being said, as a comedian not only do I have a greater threshold for the offensive, I have probably heard and thought just about every disgusting assemblage of nouns, adjectives and verbs imaginable in the English language (and since I live in Southern California, probably Spanish too). How much do you want to bet that line right there just offended 67 people, because it is somehow racist to mention that there are a lot of Spanish speaking people in an area bordering Mexico with a population of 20 million or so?

And, of course, as a comedian the First Amendment is basically my Bible. Gilbert Gottfried recently said in the documentary Can We Take a Joke? (I believe he attributed the line to George Carlin) "It's the duty of a comedian to find out where the line is drawn and deliberately cross over it." Daniel Tosh said in one of his specials, "If I offend anybody tonight I apologize, that is not my intention, I'm not gonna guess what your personal line of decency is. I cross my own from time to time. It's how I know I still have one." I think that is a good point, because I don't think anyone I know has a problem with someone being offended, either for themselves or for another person, but the issue is, as was pointed out with the Stephen Fry quote "So fucking what?"… Go ahead be offended! Have fun with that! If that is how you enjoy spending your time, have at it! Just don't try to mandate what we can and cannot say. If you don't like something, don't go see it, turn it off, ignore it, move on! In most instances, such as with comedy, don't put yourself in that situation! If words tear your soul apart, then watching people with foul mouths, breaking down our societal shortcomings might not be your thing. I am sure there is a John Denver concert replaying on PBS you can watch–Uh oh, now I talked ill of the dead… and country music… and I probably hate people with glasses even though I wear them myself! That is the thing about being offended; it is subjective and totally arbitrary. There is no definitive set of words or ideas that offend everyone equally, so why is it *my* duty to try and figure out which words *you* are afraid of?

The biggest thing, to me, in this discussion is that nowadays when people "take offense" to something is that they seem to be so upset by the words, without even looking at the intention. Intention is everything, especially IF and WHEN I clarify my meaning. If one reads into my words with his own ideas about what those words mean, that really says more about that person's mindset than mine. A good example was recently after Usain Bolt won at the Olympics again, his friend Ellen DeGeneres tweeted a picture of her on Usain's back and a caption that read "This is how I am running my errands from now on"… obviously meaning to any normal person that Usain is very fast. In fact she clarified what she meant and Mr. Bolt said he had no issue with the tweet. Still people were outraged and saying she was racist, saying what she meant was "Oh let me jump onto his back like he is a common mule." Now to me that really tells us a lot more about those who took offense than about Ellen. I never in a million years would have derived such meaning from that tweet… but I am not racist! If your mind always finds racism or sexism or some negative, evil doing in everything, perhaps that is because you possess those thoughts! Perhaps the "Social Justice Warriorism" that extends from your inner-racist thoughts is really you over compensating to conceal the true culprit: You.

I assume the title of Ben's "Offense by Proxy" is referencing Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, which is when a parent or caretaker of a child makes up, exaggerates or causes their child's illness or symptoms to get attention or sympathy. I feel that in so many of these cases we are actually witnessing MSBP in a slightly different form! This is a mental disorder. There seems to be this need to be a victim that dwells deep within a lot of people. When I was a kid my parents used to say "stop being a martyr" and over my ensuing years on this planet, I realized how many people seem to derive more pleasure or satisfaction out of being pitied (for whatever it is they claim to be a victim of) than they would if they were to solve the problem and rid their lives of that problem. The need for constant drama and the perpetual verbal patting on the back that comes along with it seems to make some people more "happy" than just being happy!

I think when we don't have much to actually complain about or be victims of, we either need to invent things to be victimized by, even if that is by proxy… Think about who gets accused of this the most; privileged college kids and middle class white "liberals"; those with arguably the least to complain about or find themselves victims of society's wrong doings. They just want to be pitied to feel a little self worth. Is that so wrong? Now don't get me wrong, I am not at all saying that censorship is a foundation or a policy of the left. I consider myself pretty damn liberal. In fact, I consider censorship to be about the most conservative ideal there is, but it definitely has been adopted by many on the left. I believe that is due to conservative-minded people losing their love for traditional religion and many other conservative ideals, but not their love for authoritarian control, but that is another topic.

Cases of censorship and obscenity charges (over language, religion, music lyrics, etc.) are all basically "Offense by Proxy." Back to my life and influences as a comedian. If we remember history, Lenny Bruce got arrested for saying things in front of an audience that was there to see him! Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys was charged with obscenity over an insert in one album; "Landscape XX," a painting done by surrealist H.R. Giger. It seems for the most part these are cases of Group A trying to stop Group B from being offended by something Group A disapproves of, even though Group B is paying to see or hear. Much of this stems from tribalism. In many indigenous or ancient cultures, the name of their tribe is their word for "humans" so anyone not part of that tribe is not human, by definition. I completely understand why tribalism exists and why it might be a good trait to have in terms of evolution; I get the need to protect the weak, the young or "your own," but we are not talking about keeping your child safe from a bear attack here. We're talking about whether a comedic Photoshopping of Ellen DeGeneres on Usain Bolt's back is somehow causing our society to crumble!

It is all pretty simple to me: Stick up for those who are actually being harmed or done an injustice. Be offended all you want and feel free to not participate in activity that offends you, patronize any establishment or support any person who offends you. Feel free to let everyone know that you are offended, but know this: Your right to be offended does not trump my right to offend. Do not revise history or literature to keep words or ideas from "offending" yourself or others. Please do not forget that being offended is a great thing, because it allows discussion to happen; it allows progress to be made. Pretending something didn't happen or wasn't said only allows it to happen again. We need to be appalled sometimes. We need people to "cross the line" in order to know where that line is drawn for each of us. There certainly is not any absolute line that we can all agree on. When someone publicly crosses the line, it helps to remind us that every single person has a different idea of where that that line is drawn; a different set of words and ideas that they find offensive and it also help us determine when it is time to move that line. If something does end up offending me, I will do what I feel necessary in that situation. However, you being offended for me, as if I can't handle myself, kind of, well… offends me.

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Ian Harris is a professional stand-up comedian, who infuses skepticism and science into his comedy. His an hour TV special "Critical & Thinking" is currently available on most video on-demand platforms and his second special "ExtraOrdinary" is due out early 2017.

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"Playing Offense"
CELESTIA WARD ©2016
A CARICATURE STAND CAN SEEM LIKE A MICROCOSM... IN LITTLE MOMENTS, PEOPLE'S FEARS AND EXPECTATIONS COME OUT. MANY EXPLICITLY STATE THEY'D PREFER A LIE TO AN UNFLATTERING OR OFFENSIVE TRUTH.
DON'T DRAW ME HOW I REALLY AM!
YET IF WE, AS ARTISTS, TREAD SO LIGHTLY FOR FEAR OF OFFENSE, IT RESULTS IN A TERRIBLE PRODUCT.
CARICATURES!
...AND IF YOU BLINKER YOURSELF LONG ENOUGH, YOU FORGET HOW TO SEE.
AMONG CARICATURISTS, BEING ABLE TO DISH OUT A REALLY "OFFENSIVE" CARICATURE IS A SKILL HELD IN HIGH REGARD. GETTING VISUALLY BUTCHERED BY A COLLEAGUE ON A SLOW DAY IS COMMONPLACE—THOUGH OFTEN MISINTERPRETED BY PASSERS-BY.
HA!
THAT'S SO WRONG!
HOW MEAN!
LOOK! MY BOYFRIEND DREW ME!
A SHOW OF SKILL, OF COMRADERY AND LOVE, CAN BE MISTAKEN BY OTHERS AS ABUSE.
QUITE EASILY.
GHAAA!!! YOU BROKE UP WITH THAT PIG, RIGHT?!
MISDIRECTED OFFENSE HAS EVEN LED TO VIOLENCE AGAINST SOME COWORKERS OF MINE.
WHAP!
*#?!
*yes, this actually happened
THIS OFFENDED FEELING IS SOMETIMES DUE TO IGNORANCE OF:
1. THE JOB
2.THE RELATIONSHIP AND INTENT
OR
3. THE WHOLE POINT OF THE ART FORM.
BUT--MORE DISTURBINGLY--SOMETIMES IT SHOWS A DEEPLY INGRAINED INABILITY TO EXAMINE WHAT ACTUALLY DESERVES TO BE CALLED OFFENSIVE AND WHY.
I HAVE SEEN PARENTS TEAR DOWN THEIR KID IN THOUGHTLESS, CRUEL WAYS, ALL TO "PROTECT" THEM FROM THE SLIGHT DANGER OF BEING INSULTED BY MY DRAWING.
THIS OFFENDS ME.
DON'T DRAW HIS EARS ALL BIG LIKE THEY ARE, AND IGNORE THE BUCK TEETH, AND PRETEND HE'S GOT NORMAL HAIR—DON'T HURT HIS FEELINGS, OKAY?!!
IT OFFENDS MY COWORKERS TOO, WHO SOMETIMES FIGHT BACK WITH UNABASHED CARNY FRANKNESS.
LADY... IF YOU THINK YOUR KID IS TOO UGLY FOR ME TO DRAW, GO PICK OUT A MORE ATTRACTIVE CHILD FROM THE CROWD AND I CAN JUST DRAW THEM INSTEAD.
Well, uh... heh...
IT'S NOT JUST KIDS' FACES THAT CAN BE A MINEFIELD.
"TOO BLACK"
"SUCH A JEW NOSE!"
"LOOKS TOO TERRORIST!"
"TOO CHINKY!"
"TOO FAT!"
THERE ARE ALL SORTS OF "DANGER ZONES" THAT CAN OFFEND AND UNNERVE!
BUT ISN'T IT TRULY OFFENSIVE TO ERASE THOSE MARKERS OF RACIAL TYPE? ARE CAUCASIAN FACES THE ONLY ONES ACCEPTABLE ENOUGH TO CELEBRATE IN CARTOON EXAGGERATION?
OOOOOOO! THAT'S RACIST!! SHE GAVE YOU BIG OL' LIPS!
I GOT BIG LIPS, DUMMY! YOU SAYING YOU DON'T LIKE MY BEAUTIFUL, GOD-GIVEN SET OF LIPS?
UH... NO... SORRY MAN...
SOME FOLKS GET IT.
DON'T MAKE ME LOOK ASIAN.
ARE YOU ASIAN?
YES.
SIGH...
OTHERS, NOT SO MUCH.
SOMEWHERE, DEEP DOWN, MANY PEOPLE VIEW INVISIBILITY AS THE HIGHEST AESTHETIC.
BLAND, CONFORMING, SAFE INVISIBILITY.
OWNING YOUR IDENTITY —AND TAKING RIBBING (or legitimate criticism) FOR IT—TAKES CHUTZPAH.
ACTING OFFENDED TAKES NONE.
NOW, LET'S PEEL BACK THIS EXTENDED METAPHOR AND LOOK AT THE OFTEN-OFFENDED WORLD OF NEWS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND SUCH....
UGH... MUST WE?
#?!
BLAH BLAH
RABBLE RABBLE
BLAH BLAH
#
YOUR FACTS OFFEND ME!
YOUR SIGN OFFENDS ME
I'M ENLIGHTENED AND CARING... SO I TAKE OFFENSE ON BEHALF OF THOSE TOO STUPID TO DO SO THEMSELVES.
STOP OPINION-SHAMING ME!
JUST LIKE AT A CARICATURE STAND, THE MYRIAD HECKLERS THAT MAKE A SHOW OF THEIR OFFENSE COULD BENEFIT FROM STEPPING BACK AND ASKING THREE QUESTIONS BEFORE POSTING OUTRAGE:
1. DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE JOB?
BUT I'M A STATISTICIAN...
I'VE SPENT YEARS ON THIS! I CAN PROVE THESE FIGURES AREN'T WRONG!
YOU SAY:
DATA SAY:
THEY'RE WORSE THAN WRONG—THEY'RE OFFENSIVE!
2. DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE RELATIONSHIP AND INTENT?
HA HA! THAT ELLEN IS HILARIOUS. I'VE GOT TO RETWEET THIS!
BOLT
3. DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE ART FORM?
SO THE GUY SAYS "THAT SOUNDS LIKE QUITE AN ACT!"
..."WHAT DO YOU CALL IT?"
SOME RUSH TO PROTECT A PERSON OR GROUP FROM IDEAS THEY THINK WILL OFFEND THEIR DELICATE EARS.
CULTURE
ART
PHILOSOPHY
JOKES
LITERATURE
BACK, FOUL DEMONS!
BUT TAKING THE N-WORD OUT OF MARK TWAIN'S BOOKS JUST WHITEWASHES HISTORY!
I DON'T AGREE WITH RICHARD DAWKINS, BUT HIS WORK MAKES ME RETHINK SOME STUFF.
I'M ACTUALLY QUITE INTO BONDAGE PORN...
ZOMBIES DON'T SCARE ME! THEY'RE FAKE.
KITTY
SOMETIMES THESE DEFENDERS ARE DEAD WRONG.
THE STAFF AT THE JANE GOODALL INSTITUTE EXCORIATED GARY LARSON FOR AN "ATROCITY" OF A CARTOON IN WHICH A FEMALE CHIMP REFERS TO GOODALL AS A "TRAMP."
HA!
TURNS OUT THAT MS. GOODALL LOVED IT, AND SHE LATER WROTE A PREFACE FOR LARSON'S FAR SIDE COLLECTION.
AND, LIKE PARENTS TRYING TO SHIELD KIDS FROM A MEAN CARICATURE, OR GOODALL'S STAFF SHIELDING HER FROM CARTOON CHIMP SLUT-SHAMING, SOMETIMES ADMINISTRATORS LOOK TO PROTECT THEIR STUDENTS FROM THAT SCOURGE OF OFFENDEDNESS.
UNIVERSITY
...FROM THINGS LIKE THREATENING IDEAS, NEW CONCEPTS, DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS.
POETRY
Full of MICROAGRESSIONS
GREEK MYTHOLOGY
TOO RAPEY!
HISTORY
Just... NOPE.
CULTURAL STUDIES
Appropriation
RAPE LAW
WAY TOO RAPEY!
THIS MOVES US TOWARD A DIFFERENT TYPE OF INVISIBILITY AESTHETIC. STUDENTS GET THE NOTION THAT STUDY SHOULD NOT GO "TOO FAR." DON'T PUSH INTO ANY DANGER ZONES, FOR FEAR OF OFFENDING SOME (REAL OR IMAGINED) GROUP OF PEOPLE.
AND ANY CARTOONIST OR COMEDIAN WILL TELL YOU... FALSE DISTORTION RARELY OFFENDS. IT GETS DISMISSED.
HEH. OKAY.
BUT EXAGGERATION BASED ON TRUTH—THAT HITS A NERVE.
HOW DARE YOU!
A SOCIETY THAT DRIFTS AWAY FROM OFFENDING ITSELF AND OTHERS ALSO DRIFTS AWAY FROM MANY TRUTHS...WHICH WILL HARM US IN WAYS FAR WORSE THAN CENSORSHIP OF RUDE CARTOONS.
SCIENCE
PHILOSOPHY
ART & CULTURE
SOCIETY WOULD FARE MUCH BETTER IF MORE CITIZENS LEARN HOW TO DISCERN TRUE OFFENSE FOM MERE COGNITIVE DISSONANCE.
THIS HAS A POINT AND PROVIDES GOOD EVIDENCE ... SO I SHOULD MAYBE ACCEPT IT WITH A COOL HEAD AND SEE HOW IT FURTHERS MY THINKING...
BUT I THINK IT WILL MAKE SOME PEOPLE ANGRY, AND I'M A CARING, EMPATHETIC PERSON... SO NOW I'M UNCOMFORTABLE.
LEARNING TO DEAL WITH COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IS A SLOW PROCESS, REQUIRING LOTS OF INPUT...
MYTHOLOGY
OPINION PAGE
#ANGRY TWEETS
AWESOME!
SO DON'T BLOCK ANYONE FROM THAT INPUT. THEY MIGHT JUST SURPRISE YOU!
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FIN.

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Celestia is a caricature artist and illustrator based in Las Vegas, Nevada. She has lent her pen to many skeptical and freethought projects, from local newsletters and t-shirt designs to Biofortified.org and Skeptical Briefs. She draws and coauthors the webcomic "Astounding Tales of Science" (ProfessorScienceComic.com), and her caricature work can be found at 2HeadsStudios.com.

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I'd like to thank the writers who offered their insightful thoughts, comments, and reactions on this topic. Obviously we could have additional responses to these responses (and so on), but the format isn't really conducive such recursion. I hope you found the pieces as interesting as I did, and readers are of course welcome to continue the… conversation. Check back next month for a new topic!

A Skeptic Reads the Newspaper

Benjamin Radford

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